



PRESS RELEASE

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Administrative Office of Courts

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Juvenile Justice Reform in Alabama and its Positive Impact

MONTGOMERY, AL – The Annie E. Casey Foundation recently published an article, “Smaller, Smarter, and More Strategic – Juvenile Justice Reform in Alabama,” in its May 2011 report chronicling the extreme measures that Alabama has taken in order to transform a flawed juvenile justice system into a progressive national model in only four years. In its article, the Casey Foundation describes the coordination between the State’s Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches in creating dramatic, but highly successful reform in this area as “an example of government done right.”

Alabama’s government first recognized the need for massive reform in 2006 when juvenile commitments to the Department of Youth Services (DYS) were at an all time high, costing citizens millions of dollars to confine or “admit” nonviolent, non-felonious juvenile offenders solely because of “probation violations, status offenses, and misdemeanors.” Nonviolent youths comprised over three-fourths of juvenile incarcerations in 2006, whereas “the rate of violent juvenile arrests had plummeted since the 1990s.” Even still, there were 3,340 juvenile commitments to DHS that year, which represented an annual increase of over 2% for the previous five years. It became apparent and imperative that significant restructuring of the system must occur in order to curtail the unfortunate trend.

DYS agreed that “incarceration [had become] an inappropriate – and overly expensive – method of addressing the behavior of most delinquent youth.” DHS accordingly shifted appropriations from incarceration to fund “programs that would explicitly serve as alternatives to incarceration.” No longer were nonviolent, technical offending juveniles to be locked up because the juvenile system had quite simply become too “flooded with low-risk youth” and “[n]obody was happy with the results [of juvenile commitments to DHS].”

The Administrative Office of Courts (AOC), acting under Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb’s leadership, worked in conjunction with DHS to radically and positively change juvenile justice in the State. Through the advocacy of the AOC, a piece of legislation came along shortly after reform began and permitted further transformation to occur. This was to be known as the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act of 2008, and its message was clear: “Alabama could do better for its youth, families, and

public safety by taking a different approach.” The “different approach” focused on rehabilitation, education, and reintegration, essentially anything but incarceration.

This method has had terrific success. The Act did not go into effect until a year after its passage, but within the year of its signing and before its provisions were implemented “DYS admissions of status offenders began to plummet immediately.” 3,340 commitments in 2006 dropped to 1,902 by 2010, a 43% decrease.

Two of the top 20 juvenile commitment counties from 2006, Autauga and Elmore, have seen, to date, reductions in admissions to DYS of 78% and 77%, respectively. Jefferson County has reduced its commitments by 54% over the past four years, while Tuscaloosa County has lowered its youth incarceration rate by 70%. The astonishing drops are all attributable to the diligent work of Alabama’s three governmental branches, DYS, and the AOC, along with the governing regulations contained in the Juvenile Justice Act.

One of the paramount concerns of reducing juvenile commitment to DYS was the uncertain and potential threat to public safety. During the “period of reform,” characterized as 2006 to the present, “juvenile arrest for violent felony offenses held steady, even dropping slightly.” This evidence illustrates that the alternative sentencing program works and *does not* interfere with public safety. The ultimate hope is that violent juvenile crime does not merely stay at a low level, but rather, continues to diminish.

In its analysis of Alabama’s juvenile reform and the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act of 2008, the Annie E. Casey Foundation calls Alabama “a national example of good government.” It can also be said that Alabama is undoubtedly *an example of government done right*.

To read the Casey Foundation’s full report, visit: <http://www.dys.alabama.gov>.

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